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# The Miseducation of Irie Jones in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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THE MIS-EDUCATION OF IRIE JONES IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

by

AMANDA MEDLOCK

(Under the Direction of Joe Pellegrino)

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I will discuss Carter G. Woodson's notion of the "mis-education" black Americans face and its applicability in British novelist, Zadie Smith's, debut novel, *White Teeth*. This novel shows how mis-education affects four generations of female Caribbean migrants. My analysis emphasizes how this mis-education shapes the life of Smith's character, Irie Jones. Throughout the text, Irie suffers from low self-esteem due to her cultural rootlessness. I attribute this rootlessness to the mis-education inherited from her female predecessors. Ultimately, I explore how instead of defeating this familial baggage, she falls victim to it.

INDEX WORDS: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, Carter G. Woodson, Stuart Hall, Mis-education, Irie Jones

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by

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.

Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, p. 16

Carter G. Woodson, renowned "Father of Black History," made this assertion in his seminal text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933). In this work, Woodson examined black Americans' socioeconomic position in the midst of the Great Depression. He attributed their lower socioeconomic standing to the effects of a failed educational system. This system purposefully erased blacks' historical contributions to the nation's construction and systematically disenfranchised them from their own cultural history. Instead, Woodson noted, "Negroes [were] taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African" (19). This self-hatred was a result of what Woodson deemed the black race's "mis-education." To correct this mis-education, it was imperative that black Americans no longer "merely be informed about other things which [they have] not been permitted to do" (80). In order to level the socioeconomic playing field, they must be taught the things they had done. Understanding their past accomplishments would allow them to visualize, and then actualize, a better future.

Sixty-five years later, R&B singer Lauryn Hill spoke from this future era in her 1998 debut album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. While Woodson critiqued the strictures of restricted access to African American history, Hill faced a different challenge: the issues

resulting from “unfettered access [...] to marketed images” of African American culture (Utley 296). Hill’s album was groundbreaking. It sold over 400,000 copies in its first week and “amassed international popularity” for the songstress (Utley 292). Her allusion to Woodson’s master work was certainly lost on the majority of her fans.

Unlike Woodson, whose historical analysis and praxis was neglected because it stood against the hegemonic status quo in the United States, Hill’s influence was seen not only in international pop culture, but in its literary scene. Zadie Smith, a first-time novelist fresh out of Cambridge, a twenty-one year old who was born and raised in the Willesden Green area in northwest London, pays homage to the singer in her own debut text, *White Teeth* (2000). *White Teeth* chronicles the lives of three immigrant families, the Joneses, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens, living in London at the close of the twentieth century. Smith’s homage to Hill and Woodson is placed in the exact center of the text: the eleventh chapter of the novel is entitled, “The Miseducation of Irie Jones.” This chapter focuses significantly on Irie Jones, but also contains the historical markers and contexts for almost every other main character in the text.

In many ways Irie can be seen as an author surrogate for Smith. Both are the offspring of a Jamaican mother and an English father. Irie also grows up in Willesden Green, the novel’s predominant setting. Both have freckles, and both are light-skinned (although Irie sees herself as dark, when she compares herself to her lily-white classmates, the “English roses”). But Smith, upon publication of *White Teeth*, could no longer think of herself as an outsider, or someone who does not fit in. Given the size of her advance for the manuscript, unheard of for a first novel at the time (£ 250,000), and the effusive pre-publication praise for it from the literati (Salman Rushdie wrote a blurb for it), it is no wonder that *White Teeth* received much critical acclaim. Smith herself was praised as “a preternaturally gifted writer [with] a voice that’s street smart and

learned” (Kakutani), and was called at various times “‘the George Eliot of multiculturalism,’ ‘the Lauren Hill of London Literature,’ and ‘literature’s great black hope’” (Thomas, 1).

The novel also spawned extensive scholarship. The majority of the critical conversation surrounding the text explores themes such as forced and voluntary migrancy, religious fundamentalism, and Smith’s affirmation of and challenge to British multiculturalism. Strikingly, the character and development of Irie Jones is a gaping lacuna in the criticism. Her neglect is perplexing, as her journey is affected by all of the previous factors. She is a second-generation immigrant, the granddaughter of a devout Jehovah’s Witness, and the product of both a colonized culture and its colonizer. This hybridity plagues her. She is beset by a lack of awareness of her own history and culture, a lack of knowledge she blames on her mother. And when she seeks to rectify this problem, she demonstrates a lack of cultural intelligence, for although she is given the raw materials for understanding her own history and culture, without any educational guidance she misinterprets those materials, conjuring up a non-existent past out of her own desire and sense of loss.

Other characters suffer from their inescapable historical baggage. But initially Irie suffers from having no historical baggage. Her predicament harkens back to the African Americans’ plight addressed in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Irie has no frame of reference for a cultural background on which she can stand. Consequently, she unwillingly yet consistently falls prey to externally-imposed European standards, and judges herself as lesser because she can never measure up. Her society, similar to Woodson’s America, has given “little or no space to the black [woman or] man’s presence” (5). In this thesis, I will analyze Irie’s cultural ignorance and absent cultural identity. This ignorance is responsible for Irie’s “mis-education,” the same one that Woodson’s African Americans received. This mis-education initially comes from external

sources, such as her school instructors, family, and friends. However, as the novel progresses, she unsuccessfully attempts to assume a sense of agency in her education. She seeks cultural awareness, but unwittingly stumbles upon her lack of cultural intelligence. She enacts this search by uncovering old family photographs and British colonial texts, and thus gains access to her history, but misinterprets its narrative. She does not learn from the past; instead, she reenacts it.

## CHAPTER 2

## CONSTRUCTING A PERSONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Readers are introduced to Irie Jones early in the novel. She is the daughter of Clara and Archie and the female companion to the twins, Magid and Millat. Clara is the daughter of Hortense, an aimless nineteen-year-old when she meets and marries the 47-year-old Archie, a fellow unmoored soul. Clara is Caribbean; Archie is as British as they come. It would be easy to say that they enact the colonial relationship within their marriage, but this is not true. While Clara is more engaged in life than Archie, and is actively pursuing her own self-fulfillment, Archie has little left to prove, although he has nothing to show for whatever it is he has been doing for the past few decades. Neither imbues Irie with a sense of drive or purpose; she is desperate for a sense of her own identity, and willingly jumps at any suggestion that will help her define herself.

Majid and Millat are the twin sons of Archie's best friend and war buddy, Samad. They are Bangladeshi (not, as one might expect, Indian or Pakistani), and, although physically indistinguishable from one another, embody oppositional characteristics. Magid is, like Archie, more British than the British. He's an intellectual, one of the "best and brightest" who would have been educated then co-opted by the colonizer if he were in his father's native land during the Raj. But he's ashamed of his heritage and his family, and at one point wants to change his name to "Mark." Millat, on the other hand, is characterized like Mustafa Sa'eed from Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. Smith reveals this kinship when she says "there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere" (225). Like Sa'eed, Millat is irresistible to women, for he is a blank canvas that they can fill with all their projections about the exotic. He is also their project, the

possibly salvageable bad boy that occasions conversations and even poetry on the necessity of his redemption. While Sa'eed purposefully manipulates his image in order to possess these women, Millat is not that self-aware; his image, created out of his own anger and attempts to hide his pain, is not fully under his control. His resentment of his rootlessness is what makes him attractive: "It was this soft underbelly that made him most beloved, most adored, by Irie and the nice oboe-playing, long-skirted, middle-class girls" (225).

Irie is juxtaposed against these girls and all they represent. They know who they are. They know their place in the world. They can be self-assured because they're surrounded by the society and culture that they feel they own. When they look around, they see themselves reflected in almost every face they see. Even the twins can look at one another and, at least physically, see themselves. But there is no one who looks like Irie, no one who thinks like her, and no one as lost as her.

In the latter half of the text, Smith moves Irie from the supporting cast to center stage. She is a fitting character for this spotlight as her voluptuous figure makes her hard to miss (221). She suffers from what D. A. Azibo calls *mammyism*: "genetic blackness minus psychological blackness" (185). This psychological condition manifests itself when "black females, embracing a Eurocentric perspective of beauty, reject their African physical features, especially skin color and hair. Black females adopt Euro-American cultural norms" (Robinson-Moore 73). Irie's body, and her self-consciousness about it, is the foundation for all her feelings of difference. She struggles to fit in, to personify the Anglo-centric ideals of beauty that she sees all around her. Dina Yerima outlines these standards: a woman must have "nonkinky hair that might be either straight or wavy, slim physique, and fair complexion as opposed to bigger, fuller physiques and darker complexions" (642). Irie's dissatisfaction with her outward appearance is also applicable

to her hair texture. She views her coarse Afro hair as “impossible” (224). To combat what she sees as a genetic misfortune, Irie goes to P.K.’s Afro Hair: Design and Management in hopes of gaining “straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair” (228). However, the chemical relaxer intended to soften her kinky hair ultimately destroys it. After losing most of her hair during this process, Irie resorts to buying hair extensions from a local beauty supply store. Eventually, though, she removes the extensions in favor of her natural hair.

This attempt to force her body to conform to a standard that she is naturally ill-suited for is, at best, a manifestation of self-loathing. To diminish her voluptuous figure, Irie uses sweatshirts and tight whalebone corsets. These corsets were a common item in the Victorian Era, particularly for middle- and upper-class women. Nancy V. Workman remarks on the iconic and symbolic nature of this piece of fashion. She claims that, “[g]reatly restricted by social conventions, women’s roles were confining and painful, and the corset epitomized women’s plight as ‘exquisite slave’” (64). The literal and figurative confinement of English women was so internalized by them that they themselves chose to bind their bodies in this unnatural fashion. Victorian men, too, were tightly constricted, as they were expected to be hypermasculine. This hypermasculinity was seen as a necessity for and result of British imperialism. Imperialism required a certain caliber of man, one whom could invade the foreign lands of the east and impose European values and standards on the natives. These foreign lands included the Caribbean, the home of Irie’s ancestors and the root of her “substantial Jamaican frame” (221). This frame includes “big tits, big butt, [and] big hips” (221).

It is ironic that Irie subjects herself to these corsets in an attempt to both disguise her figure and deny her physical heritage. Workman puts it thus: “[t]he corset, with its ability to

tightly emphasize a woman's form, pushed up the breasts while simultaneously outlining the hips, giving women an overall appearance of ample curves" (63). Therefore, Irie employs a garment designed to create her actual body shape in order to diminish it. She is using it in a manner that is in opposition to its original intent. This ultimately failed process of body binding is another example of her historical ignorance and cultural insecurity. Her fullness appears foreign in a land where the standard and prized female figure is angular and slender. And yet, because she does not know the history behind her shape, she is unable to embrace the fact that she *is* foreign.

Irie's ignorance of her body type is "another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths [...] another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories" (Smith 314). Understandably, she blames her parents for her unawareness. Irie doesn't know what secrets are being kept from her, but she knows that there are secrets being withheld. She sees clues that hide hidden meanings and unspoken truths, but she does not know enough to pursue those truths. However, readers know that Clara and Archie can only be held partially accountable for these gaps in her knowledge. They are both victims and perpetrators of ancestral ignorance. The narrator notes that "Archie Jones could give no longer record of his family than his father's own haphazard appearance on the planet" (280). Clara hardly fares better, as she "knew a little about her grandmother [...] but could only state definitively that her own mother was born at 2:45 P.M. on January 1, 1907" (280). While Archie's lack of familial history does keep his daughter in the dark about her history, its impact is nowhere near as damaging as Clara's choice to keep Irie from her Caribbean roots. Living in England, Irie is immersed in the contemporary culture that is a product of her father's history writ large. But, removed from the Caribbean and kept from the knowledge of her ancestral history, she cannot see herself as the product of a specific cultural

history, one that is both and neither British and Caribbean. It is this history that consumes Irie while simultaneously ostracizing her.

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall, himself a part of the Windrush Generation, offers considerable insight into the understanding of Caribbean identities and how they are formed. In his essays, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” and “Negotiating Caribbean Identities,” he analyzes central factors affecting this formation. First, Hall addresses the process of cultural survival. This process entails the act of double retention. The first retention is that of the colonized. This retention is enacted through the preservation of their native language, music, and dance. This preservation serves to alleviate the trauma of colonization and prevents the decimation of the “original” culture. The colonizers also practice a form of retention in the configuration of their colonies. According to Hall, “the Little Englands, the Little Spains and the Little Frances” served as “fossilized replica[s]” to “keep alive the memory of their own homes and homelands and traditions” (285). In their attempts to retain their cultural pasts in their construction of the Caribbean, both the colonized and the colonizers establish a nation whose inherent condition is rooted in a past that has not survived the hegemony of the colonial project. This past, imbued with nostalgia, may never have really existed, at least in the way that both the colonized and the colonizers imagine it. This is particularly problematic for the natives, who have no solid foundation upon which they can base their cultural identity, nor a physical homeland to which they can return. Their past has been erased by the colonizers, so their disenfranchisement is almost total.

Hall offers two differing takes on cultural identity. The first stance defines the term as “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold

in common” (223). Those who adhere to this essentialist position see this “oneness” as “the truth, the essence, of ‘Caribbeanness,’ of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express (223).

The idea here is static; it offers a “stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223). But it is also too simplistic, implying that blacks living in the diaspora need only reverse their diasporic journeys and recover their African pasts in order to discover their true cultural identity. Hall appreciates the cultural work that has been underpinned by this understanding cultural identity (pointing especially to Negritude and the work of Fanon), but ultimately it is “a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas” (224).

But identity is dynamic, and Hall recognizes that by furthering his initial definition. Here, along with the Pan-Caribbean leanings of the first, is the awareness that “there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’” (225). Cultural identities are not an *idée fixe* bound to the past. Rather, they are continually transformed, because they are “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (225). They are “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (225). They engage with the future as well as the past. They are contingent upon place, time, and history, and are thus conditioned by specific circumstances with specific people (or peoples). He concludes by noting that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225).

As the descendant of Caribbean migrants, Irie both directly and indirectly confronts these issues on her journey to self-awareness. Her pilgrimage to and through her past begins with a

desire to recover some sense of self by traveling to Africa to “see how other people live!” (313). But her mother sees a different motivation. Speaking without her false white teeth, Clara approximates the patois of her own mother and grandmother when she frames Irie’s desire: “Koo go and share and ogle at poor black folk[.] Dr. Livingshone, I prejume?” (313). Clara frames Irie’s desire to travel as something incomplete, unfulfilling, and ultimately a repetition of the colonial project. In short, Irie desires an essentialist self-definition that will look like Hall’s first, incomplete, understanding of cultural identity.

With her trip to her grandmother’s house, Irie. She initially searches for a place “to do some quiet study [...] and get my head together” (318). Irie plans on staying no longer than a few months. However, upon her discovery of her grandmother’s media cache of memorabilia, her plans are drastically altered. During this uncovering, Irie is provided glimpses into her family’s past. She sees a picture of her adolescent mother and her mouth of missing teeth. Yet, more importantly, she finds colonial texts such as Geo. J.H. Sutton Moxly’s *An Account of a West Indian Sanatorium*, Michael Scott’s *Tom Cringle’s Log*, and Eden Phillpotts’ *In Sugar Cane Land*. She also discovers photographs of her great-grandmother, Ambrosia Bowden, and her great-grandfather, Captain Charlie “Whitey” Durham. While Irie finds the pictures of her ancestors, no one teaches her about their story, nor does Irie ask for guidance. Instead, she designs her own misguided historical account. She incorrectly interprets the relationship between Ambrosia and Durham as the organic product of a “well-wooded and watered place” where a “young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complications, both of them fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future—a place where things simply *were*” (332).

Irie’s inexperience, and her misreading of her family’s history, proceeds along the lines that Hall has laid out. She attempts to uncover an identity, as if solely looking backward would

be sufficient to give her a sense of rootedness. While this may offer her the raw materials she will need in order to negotiate her relationship with the culture that surrounds her, it is too removed, too fixed in place and time, to fulfill all her needs. Irie does not move to Hall's fuller consideration of cultural identity. That is, she does not claim any agency for herself. She understands, or misunderstands, how she has been acted upon (by her history, her family, her friends, etc.), but she does not see that she too can act. As a human, and especially as a teenager, she undergoes constant transformation. But since she is the subject of those changes, she cannot see herself as the author of those changes as well. This gap in her understanding leads her to create a one-sided historical fairy-tale that she tells herself. To understand the depth of her error, one must be aware of the true history which she mis-envisions.

## CHAPTER 3

## AMBROSIA AND DURHAM: A LITTLE ENGLISH EDUCATION

While Irie's revelation of her great-grandparents unfolds in chapter fifteen, "Chalfenism Versus Bowdenism," the story of Ambrosia and Durham begins in chapter thirteen, "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden." Here, readers witness the origin of the mis-education that plagues Irie's experience. In colonial Jamaica at the turn of the twentieth century, Ambrosia's mis-education is presented as a typical English colonial education. She first receives instruction from Captain Durham, whose amorous pursuit of her was characteristic of European men in the colonial West Indies. Frequently, these men sailed to the Caribbean in search of financial success or as punishment for their exploits in their European home nations. Many European men took Caribbean women as mistresses, choosing first from among the slaves and then from those who were freed. An earlier colonial account by John Williamson, an English doctor practicing medicine in Kingston, refers to this practice: "[b]lack and brown mistresses are [...] necessary appendages to every establishment. Even a young bookkeeper, coming from Europe, is generally instructed to provide himself; and however repugnant the idea might seem at first, his scruples are overcome and conforms to the general custom" (qtd. in Vasconcellos 43).

When searching for a mistress, the tenderness of a woman's age was not a factor that was usually under consideration. Colleen Vasconcellos notes that many men sought companionship from pre-adolescent girls, some of which were only ten years of age or younger. Notions of "childhood" and "womanhood" were still uncertain insofar as when these periods began and ended. In 1816, the Jamaican Assembly passed legislation to combat relationships with such great age differences. This law stipulated that any "carnal knowledge" between "a female slave below [the age of ten] was punishable by death" (Fuller, qtd. in Vasconcellos 44). This law aided

in solidifying the definition of childhood in the British West Indies. Before the passage of this law, womanhood was thought to begin sometime during a young woman's fourteenth and fifteenth year. However, with this legislation, womanhood was mandated to begin at age eleven. While this act was well-intentioned in holding these colonial men accountable for what amounts to child molestation, it was difficult to enforce. Violators did not confess their crimes. Victims were often paid for their silence or had their claims dismissed when forced to confront their molesters.

This abuse of power, and its imbalance, are presented in the relationship between Ambrosia and Captain Durham and are, unfortunately, not recognized by Irie. What ultimately distinguishes the Durham/Ambrosia affair from those of their contemporaries is Durham's determination educate Ambrosia. It was common for men in these relationships to offer their mistresses various gifts (Vasconcellos 45). Prior to emancipation, some slave girls received better clothing, less strenuous work assignments on the plantation, or improved housing for their families. In much rarer cases, manumission was offered. And yet an education, whether formal or informal, was uncommon. Colonizing nations like England--Durham's home country--struggled to develop educational systems in their colonies. This project was stymied by Europeans' disbelief in the potential profit of an educated native. This notion was particularly extended to peoples of African descent, whose cognitive capacity was believed to be severely limited. Rooted in Social Darwinism, this assumption about the intellectual inferiority of other races was employed in the justification of European racial discrimination. This view gained significant traction with the rise of British imperialism. A perversion of Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection, it was nevertheless endorsed by his contemporaries, notably the sociologists Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. Their version of the theory

claims, “the biological processes of natural selection” are capable of “explain[ing] characteristics of social groups” (Kretchmar). Inevitably, a hierarchy of biological and intellectual superiority was developed, with the white races on top and those of a darker complexion occupying the lowest rungs on the ladder of perceived intelligence. These beliefs carried on the assumptions inherent in the rise of Modernity in the West and its globally influential manifestation as Enlightenment principles.

The concept of rationality and its importance was a distinguishing feature of this age. Rationality, or, more specifically, a human being’s possession of rational thought, was seen as the differentiating factor between humans and lower/lesser life forms. What was more celebrated than an individual’s possession of rational thought was the management and exercise of such thought. The greater one’s ability to apply reason in controlling the “lower” appetites (especially emotion), the more one was perceived to be intellectually superior. One of the foundational philosophers of the Enlightenment, the Scotsman David Hume, speaks to these views in his essay, *Of National Character*. Here he classifies the different races and their corresponding levels of intelligence. He claims that “I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites.” He does so because, “There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (para. 32). Immanuel Kant later furthered Hume’s assertion by claiming that “The race of the Negroes, one could say, is . . . full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain. They can be educated but only as servants (slaves), that is they allow themselves to be trained” (qtd. in Eze 116).

These racist sentiments remained a part of the European consciousness during the rise of colonialism. Colonizers viewed the native inhabitants as brutish, hapless, and helpless.

Compared to the European nations, the remainder of the world, and particularly the African continent, was viewed as uncivilized and underdeveloped. Europe viewed the colonial project as a moral imperative, to bring light to the benighted. Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" is the obvious recitation of this self-deluded view, embodied in the religious, economic, social, and cultural spheres. The lynchpin for all of these was the idea of educating those who were colonized. As with Majid, those with the aptitude and desire could be shown the heart of the metropole, the crown of the Empire, and be educated in England. Those who were not as desirable -- or as beneficial to the colonizers -- would also be educated, but *in situ* and to a much lesser degree. Thus we have the rise of the colonial educational system, aptly summarized by Çağrı Mart, using that most time-honored of British colonial texts, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*:

Crusoe begins imposing cultural imperialism. He gives Friday his new name and instructs "Friday" to call him "Master." Crusoe then teaches Friday English Language needed for master-servant relationship, [sic] and he wants Friday to be useful, handy and dependent. Crusoe then converts Friday's religion [...] Crusoe is able to prove his superiority through tongue, pen, gun and Bible. (191)

Crusoe's actions, especially the move from language to writing to the threat of a violent encounter, all supported by a religious or moral fervor, have echoes in the steps Captain Durham takes with his Jamaican mistress, Ambrosia. The order of his actions deviate from Crusoe's. However, the fundamental principles remain. Durham begins the process of civilizing Ambrosia by teaching her "[l]etters, numbers [...] English history, trigonometry" (296). In this instruction, Durham figuratively and literally uses his "tongue [and] pen" to teach Ambrosia. As an inhabitant of colonial Jamaica, Ambrosia is more advanced than her narrative counterpart, Friday. She speaks the English language either through previous formal training, or through the

economic necessity of learning this language imposed on her island. Nevertheless, she is not educated to Durham's standard. He trains her in speaking and writing, having her practice by "[reading] the trials of Job and [studying] the warnings of Revelation . . . and [singing] 'Jerusalem'" (296). Smith's detailing of Ambrosia's colonial education includes a subject that Defoe does not: sexuality. Durham literally employs his tongue, or more specifically, that of Ambrosia's, in her forced sexual training. After teaching her British history and culture, he shows her "how to kiss a man's ear until he wept like a child" (296). The narrator defines this portion of Ambrosia's teaching as that of "anatomy," which took place when "Ambrosia's mother was safely out of the house [...] given on top of the student as she lay on her back, giggling" (296).

Durham's use of the Bible in his instruction adds a patina of moral rectitude to his "lessons." Smith, in an odd anachronistic lapse, has him teaching Ambrosia the famous hymn by Hubert Parry, even though it was not published until 1916. (Durham was not prescient, and this is probably not a commentary on the prophetic powers of the Jehovah's Witnesses. It seems, rather, more like a minor lapse.) Smith's twist on Crusoe's use of a gun is seen in his disappearance, for he must "control the situation in a printing company in Kingston, where a young man called Garvey was staging a printers' strike for higher wages" (297). Although the narrator, reporting from the British perspective, fails to see the import of Garvey's actions, readers recognize the significance of this event and its implications. Smith shows the nascent "Back-to-Africa" movement promoted by Marcus Garvey (and dismissed by Hall as insufficient for a full understanding of one's cultural heritage), a movement noted for its promotion of the removal of European powers, such as Captain Durham and the British nation, from their respective colonies.

During the interim between his absence and later return, which was occasioned by the 1907 Kingston earthquake, Durham provides for Ambrosia's continued education. Her "instructor" would be a fellow Englishman and possessor "of the opinion that the natives required instruction, Christian faith, and moral guidance," Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard (297). Glenard did not serve as Ambrosia's mentor for long. Her pregnancy soon became indisputable, "[p]eople began to talk [which] simply wouldn't do" (297), and the island's gossip deterred Glenard from allowing her in his home. Nonetheless, neither her pregnancy nor outside opinions discouraged him from his sexual predation. In a repeat of Durham's initial encounter with Ambrosia (one of Smith's favorite narrative strategies), Glenard stumbles upon Ambrosia after having "one snifter too many at the Jamaica Club" (298). He attempts to force her to agree to a sexual encounter in the Santa Antonia church, in order to ensure his silence about her pregnancy. He couches this sexual blackmail in the most specious terms possible, telling her that, "One should never pass up the opportunity of a little education, after all" (299). Both Durham and the reprehensible Glenard make the same intellectual joke to themselves: employing the King James euphemism for sex, "to know." The proper end of an education is not just knowing more, but also being known.

Glenard forces Ambrosia into an old Catholic church, named the Santa Antonia, where he will spend the remainder of his life on earth. His rape of her begins with his pawing at her milk-laden breasts, but is cut short by the confluence of what Smith calls "two different histories." She says that "Every moment happens twice: inside and outside," and this doubling creates these bifurcated histories (299). Ambrosia's water breaks at the exact instant that the great 1907 earthquake begins. Glenard's predation is cut short because of his choice of venue; a statue of the madonna from the church's interior falls from its plinth and crushes him. The irony of the

exclusively Catholic image of an idealized mother crushing a man who's attempting to rape an already-pregnant woman, and the timing of it reinforcing the apocalyptic beliefs of a Jehovah's Witness is one of the most satisfying sites in the book. Glenard's convenient use of the empty church for his tryst exposes him to a death rendered by an object he, as a Methodist, would have railed against most vehemently: a statue that promotes the idolatrous worship of the Virgin. His untimely death frees Ambrosia, who crawls out of the crumbling church in time to safely give birth to Hortense.

Glenard's influence on the Bowden women, and their mis-education, spans several decades. For Ambrosia, his unwillingness to take her into his home leads her, eventually, to Mrs. Brenton, "a fiery Scottish spinster who specialized in lost souls, had her own ideas" (297). She is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a Christian denomination best known for its door-to-door preaching and the distribution of various publications, such as *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* Their theology is not quite mainstream, as they are non-Trinitarian and believe the end of the current world system at Armageddon is imminent. They do not observe any religious or civil holidays, and are convinced that the establishment of God's kingdom over the earth is the only solution for all problems faced by humanity. They see these beliefs as based on scripture, calling their body of beliefs "the Truth," and believers live "in the Truth." Mrs. Brenton "introduced the Bowdens to the Witnesses, the Russellites, the *Watchtower*, the Bible Tract Society [...] that winter of 1906" (297, 298). Mrs. Brenton's influence, in the absence of any non-religious education, sparks Ambrosia's religious transformation, which eventually supplants her colonial education and gives her both a sense of agency and urgency.

While under Durham's instruction, Ambrosia was constantly reminded by him that she had been elevated. He claimed that, although her "daily chores remained unchanged," in her

heart, she had become a lady. She was, at least internally, a “*maid no more*” (296). Durham endeavored to make Ambrosia see her newly-distinguished personhood. But her external circumstances mitigated against this, because they did not reflect her internal growth. For a while, she tried to balance “the Truth” from Jehovah with the words of her lover/teacher. She is almost unable to distinguish between the two; on the day of the earthquake, she actually “bounced with her bulge down King Street, praying for the return of Christ or the return of Charlie Durham--the two men who could save her” (298).

After the earthquake passes, after Ambrosia witnesses the gruesome death of Glenard, after her contractions mirrors the tectonic plates and she gives birth to Hortense, Captain Durham returns in search of her. His devotion to her is obvious; he spends his time and energy looking for her and neglects his duty to save the “handful of servants, butlers and maids, the chosen few the English [would take] with them to Cuba” (300). In this scene, readers witness the hard blow dealt to Durham’s own “English education” (300). As a British citizen, and a military man at that, Durham had been taught that he was entitled to dominion over his nation’s colonies and the colonies’ various spoils, such as his mistress. The earthquake forces him to not only recognize the error in his understanding, but he must confront the true transience underlying his position. While he is searching for Ambrosia, he finds himself in a frantic sea of black faces that do not reflect his own. The only familiar figure is not even alive; it is a “statue of Victoria, five aftershocks having turned her round by degrees until she appears to have her back to the people” (300). The rotated statue represents the British failure to protect, maintain, and sustain its colony. This idea is reinforced by the sudden presence of American ships in the harbor, coming from a nation--and a rival to Britain’s imperial plans--that, unlike Britain, “ha[s] the resources to pledge serious aid” (300).

The stodgy statue of Victoria, turning a blind eye to her subjects who are suffering, also mirrors Durham's own failure in protecting his mistress. Readers cannot hold Durham responsible for the great earthquake, but he must be held accountable for placing the mother of his child in the care of the lecherous Glenard. Durham's fruitless encounter with Sir James Swettenham, the Jamaican governor, is the final reinforcement of just how powerless Durham actually is. Durham implores Swettenham to give Ambrosia passage on one of the departing aid ships. He claims that she is different from the other natives in that she is an "educated Negress" whom he wishes to marry (300). But neither Ambrosia's English education nor Durham's pleas are able to convince the governor. Just as his late queen rejects her subjects, her viceroy rejects Durham. His station is, in the larger scheme of the colonial project, inconsequential. But at least he has his student/lover, or so he thinks. Prior to meeting with the Governor, Durham sends to Ambrosia, asking her to run away with him. But as he emerges from his meeting, her response is waiting, a note with "[o]ne sentence torn from Job: *I will fetch my knowledge from afar*" (301). Durham is reduced by his monarch, his government, and his lover, and the final reduction is the worst, because he had always maintained a position of power over her. But his loss of authority over Ambrosia marks her attainment of agency over herself and her destiny. Her decision to obtain an education, even one so unconventionally religious and out of step with society, is a form of power. This rejection of the educating colonizer and father of her daughter makes for a critical shift in the Bowden female lineage.

Although she ultimately rejects his offer to run away with him, Ambrosia's relationship with Durham has a far-reaching impact on the lives of her descendants. Their interaction establishes the initial Bowden heritage which the narrative further depicts: Hortense is born. Their relationship also becomes the model that her descendants consciously or unconsciously

imitate in their own relationships. Finally, this problematic couple passes down their cultural and colonial baggage to their offspring. This lessons learned from this union will reverberate throughout the Bowden family tree for three more generations. Hortense, Clara, and Irie all unknowingly but incessantly make their own negotiations with the coupling of their common progenitor and the imperialist environment in which it occurred. While these three characters all attempt to reconcile themselves to their inherited burdens, it is Hortense who is most cognizant of her familial history and consequently, whose actions it most impacts.

## CHAPTER 4

## HORTENSE AND CLARA: MISCEGENATION, MOTHERHOOD, AND MIS-EDUCATION

Criticism on Hortense Bowden generally analyzes her religious zeal, beginning with her supernatural moment of conversion. Before leaving her mother's womb, she becomes a Jehovah's Witness. It was her "belief that at the moment her mother recognized Jehovah, Hortense herself became conscious, though still inside the womb" (298). She employs this prenatal consciousness to explain "why she could cover pages [from the bible] with her hand and quote them from memory, though she had never read them before" (298). Hortense also uses this rationale to support "why it felt like a 'remembrance' to read the six volumes" of *Millennial Dawn*, a biblical guide by Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses. When readers consider Hortense's upbringing, in the midst of colonial Jamaica, it is not difficult to understand the allure of the surety offered by this fundamentalist branch of Christianity. Patrick Taylor offers a sociological explanation for the appeal of this religion: "people are attracted to the Jehovah's Witnesses because it gives order and meaning to the disruption and disorder of modernity" (440). While attitudes toward the disruption and disorder of modernity vary, he notes that, "[i]n the Caribbean context, modernity brings with it the tensions of ethnic, racial, and class division characteristic of postcolonial society" (440).

These divisions, imposed by the colonial establishment, serve to enforce the perception by those colonized that their community, and indeed, their very selves, are inferior to those of the colonizer. Fanon, Hall, and a number of other critics recognize this, and look to its effects in the psychological and sociological lives of those colonized. This psychological imposition allows for those who enforce the rules of the colonizer, men like Captain Durham, to consider Jamaica "as his, his to help or his to hurt" (300). But a religion like the Jehovah's Witnesses, with its strict

notion of the Elect (only 144,000 will be saved from eternal damnation), and its self-assurance that those “in the Truth” are the only ones who will survive Armageddon, permits victims of imperialism like Ambrosia and Hortense to possess a sense of authority and value akin to that felt by their colonizers. Ambrosia, and eventually Hortense, sees the earthquake as a harbinger of the End Times, the beginning of the end of the world. They are both ready to take their place among the Elect, full of surety and self-possession. While her race and gender may paint her as subordinate on earth, in the afterlife she will be prized. Her subscription to this ideology affords her internal certainty. And yet, while it can provide her peace within her environment, it cannot protect her from inheriting the burdens produced by her environment. Ironically, Hortense’s devout and long-standing commitment to her faith leads her to experience the same effects that the colonial enterprise had on its colonized victims. This outcome appears in Hortense’s relation to her family. However, to fully comprehend her relation to her family, one must understand her relation to herself.

Hortense’s sense of self, at times, seems plagued by self-hatred. Fanon defines this self-loathing, this “inferiority complex,” as characteristic of the colonial and postcolonial subject (9). He claims this complex “has been created by the death and burial of [the colonized peoples’] local cultural originality” (9). But it is not enough for the colonizers to simply remove one sense of cultural identity; the absence will be noted, and it will be filled. So the colonizers then seek to indoctrinate the colonized: they must reject their native religion, dance, dress, and language in favor of those imposed on them by the dominant order. In this way the gaps in their cultural and personal memories and sense of identity are filled in material deemed appropriate by those who hold the power (military power, cultural capital, but, most importantly, power over the administration of an educational system). In this way, English colonial schools produced

graduates with both holes in their identities where their prior cultural knowledge and identity resided and new repositories of knowledge of a culture and a history that was ultimately foreign to those on whom it was imposed. Fanon's personal example of the use of one's native language gets at the crux of this:

The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids *Creolisms*. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it [...] Yes I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me, "He doesn't even know how to speak French." (10, 11)

Language and skin color are both areas where Fanon sees the imposition of compliance upon those colonized. Assimilation in language leads to the suppression of the Creole. Assimilation in presence leads to the erasure of "blackness." He writes that in the colonial hegemonic relationship, whiteness is a "symbol of purity, of *Justice, Truth, Virginity*," but blackness "stands for *ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality*" (xiii). Therefore, the closer a black (colonized) person could come to looking white, the more accepted he or she would be by the colonizers. This denial of the self, for Fanon, holds severely negative psychological consequences. While the psychological burden of passing may be a stock character trait in African American literature, this idea, and the necessity for it, is not so prevalent in the tradition that claims Zadie Smith. For Hortense, her biracial parentage, and her physicality that offers more of Durham than of Ambrosia, is the root of a profound sense of self-hatred. Hortense is the product of miscegenation, which is seemingly one of multiple negative effects of receiving an English colonial education. She takes no pride in her mixed ethnicity, nor does she use it to seek

acceptance in her new home, England. Instead, Hortense, appears to be ashamed of her hybridity. This shame presents itself in her marriage to Darcus Bowden, and eventually in her disdain for Clara's interracial marriage.

Hortense's choice in a husband stands as a monument to her defiance against her white blood and white father. Her choice is Darcus Bowden, a man with the same last name as her. The Bowden name came to the Caribbean with William Bowden, one of Lord Chancellor Oliver Cromwell's first 500 settlers in 1656. Smith's use of it here points to both the historical possibility that Hortense and Darcus are both descended from the same man and the colonial--and slave-owning--practice of masters having sex with their female slaves. Smith coyly offers the possibility that Hortense's parents weren't the first of her ancestors to cross color lines. And if this is true, it both reframes and refutes Hortense's rejection of her white half. Darcus is black, and Hortense marries him, as she admits much later, because he is so black. She is not thinking about her own happiness, but rather about her progeny. She wants them to be black, not white and not mixed.

Despite his superficial appearance in opposition to Captain Durham, Darcus and Durham are quite similar. Both men are absent during the formative years in the lives of their partners. Durham is sent from the metropole to the frontier, from the heart of the empire to its fringes. While there, he is forced further away from that which he cares for. He is initially sent to Kingston and later, in the latter half of Ambrosia's pregnancy, to Trinidad. He does not return for Ambrosia until the day after she gives birth. Because Ambrosia refuses to run away with him, she keeps him from playing a role in upbringing of their daughter. Ambrosia never replaces the Captain, and so Hortense is raised without a central father figure. Darcus completes Durham's journey; he is from the colonial periphery, but travels to its center. A member of the Windrush

generation, he sails to England in 1958 to “earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join him, and settle down” (26). He goes before his wife and his two-year-old child, to prepare a place for them. The apocalyptic overtones this journey are obvious. Darcus’ life as he knows it will end in the heart of the empire, but like the savior he’s seen so many times in *The Watchtower*, he goes to “prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (*The New International Version*, John 14:3). The completion of the cyclic journey begun by Durham signifies an end to the way of life that he, and his family, had come to know. Unwittingly, he is preparing for a different form of existence. And just as Durham disappears from Smith’s narrative after Ambrosia rejects him, so too does Darcus disappear into the life of the British working poor, filled with inaction and indolence and pacified by “the dole, the armchair, and British television” (26). His debilitating illness, “that no doctor could find any physical symptoms of, but which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy,” (26) keeps him out of the life of his family (and the sphere of influence for his daughter) for fourteen years.

Darcus’ undiagnosed ailment does not simply prevent the Bowden patriarch from sending for his family; it sapped him of all his competency. His loss of self-governance or self-motivation is the inverse of Durham’s progression. Durham loses his power at the hands of the Jamaican island, that “proved itself to have a mind all of its own” (300). Durham’s descent takes place on the colonial margins while Darcus is paralyzed by the colonial core. They both lose their power and self-determination, and this loss of agency creates a vacuum filled by their partners’ assumption of their own power. Ambrosia finds strength in her religion. Hortense finds the strength to make “the journey [to England] under her own steam” to reunite her family (26). Upon her arrival, she gives her husband a legendary “tongue-lashing” that “lasted four hours”

(26). Her verbal flogging of her husband flays the last vestiges of his sense of self from his bones, causing him to “slump deeper into the recesses of his chair” and never again utter any other word beyond “hmp” (26, 27). Durham is physically removed from the presence of his family by the mother of his child. Darcus, while physically present, is psychologically exiled from the family that the Lotus-Eaters of the welfare state, rent control, and the BBC nightly lineup lulled him to forget.

Darcus’s recession into his couch and away from his family has no evident impact on Hortense. Ostensibly, their union was not based upon emotional affection or physical attraction. Notably, though not necessarily Darcus’s fault, when Hortense was inspired by the “Lord’s voice” to conceive Clara, this was described as her submitting to “her least favorite activity” (28). It is also worth noting that like Ambrosia, Hortense only has one child. It is unknown whether or not this was a voluntary choice. And yet, if it is, it seems to further confirm Hortense’s lack of sexual desire for her husband, or perhaps a general lack of interest in sexual relations. Truthfully, readers are not provided much insight into the marriage between Hortense and Durham or its emergence. And yet, what we *do* know is that their marriage was not the product of mere circumstance. While it is uncertain whether Darcus’s background or personality attracted Hortense, we know that his race was not only desirable, but *necessary*.

History repeats itself, again and again, as similar parallels surface in later generations. Both Clara and Irie, in choosing Archie and Joshua Chalfen, reenact their ur-mother’s choices and their ur-father’s absence. After discovering Clara’s union with Archie, the narrator roots Hortense’s anger not in the couple’s near three-decade age gap, but because she had “put all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink” (272). Michele Braun notes that Hortense is anxious over the potential “disappearance of [her] ethnic identity; framed

in genetic terms” she fears her biological “genotype will be hidden by phenotype” (223). In other words, Hortense fears that her descendants will not look like her mother, Ambrosia, who was not of mixed race, but that they would be “more high-colored,” like herself, and consequently, more caucasian (272). To support her sentiments, she employs a fusion of scripture with her own interpretations:

Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up. Dat’s why he made a hol’ heap a fuss about de children of men building de tower of Babel. ‘Im want everybody to keep tings separate. *The Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.* Genesis 11:9. When you mix it up, nuttin’ good can come. It wasn’t *intended*.  
(318)

Seemingly as an afterthought, Hortense asserts that Irie was “about de only good ting to come out of dat” (318). Irie’s position as the only positive outcome of miscegenation excludes Hortense and thus, reaffirms her devalued self-conception.

In this defense of Irie’s hybridity, readers are offered hints of Hortense’s self-hatred and the degree of estrangement between Clara and herself. This mother-daughter relationship resembles that of Hortense and Darcus as the communication between the two has been significantly diminished. Sticking to the narrative’s penchant for repeating occurrences, this broken dialogue between mother and daughter later arises in the relationship between Clara and Irie.

While Clara’s marriage to Archie preyed upon Hortense’s most fundamental anxieties, their familial bond always appeared destined for failure. This failure was predicated on Clara’s lack of religious conviction. Although she executed the “doorstepping, administration, writing

speeches, and all the varied business of the church,” she was never able to fully immerse herself in the faith (29). What Clara could worship was the “very thin and tall, redheaded, flat-footed, and freckled,” Ryan Topps (24). In Ryan, Clara found not only religion but a sense of community, two attributes historically essential to the Caribbean individual’s understanding of both motherhood and family. In her essay, “We Kind of Family,” Merle Hodge defines the concept of family in a traditional Caribbean context. According to her:

A family is an organization of people that provides for its members’ material needs (food, clothing and shelter), and their emotional needs (approval, acceptance, solidarity and warmth), and socializes the young. There are different kinds of groupings that perform the functions of the family. In the Caribbean, the term “family” could refer to one, or all, of three organizations: a sexual union and its offspring; a household; or a network not confined to any one household. (476)

There is much to unpack in Hodge’s definition and its application within the novel. First, it is important to note that this definition “reveals that Caribbean understandings of the family are more communal and not restricted to the physical space of the home” (Beatson 78). In other words, this West Indian conception of family is not restricted to the more intimate, “nuclear” group that characterizes the Western description of family. For a child being raised within this cultural context, the community outside the immediate family would be influential in his or her upbringing. Clara misses out on this form of rearing, due to Hortense’s faith. Jehovah’s Witnesses are ardent believers in attempting to convert those outside their fold. However, division from the outside world is also crucial to those of this faith. “Bad associations” with non-believers could contaminate the purity of the faithful” (Weddle 3630). Hortense strictly adheres to this sentiment and endeavors to impress its necessity onto Clara. She does so by painting

Clara's high school as the "devil's lair" and "fill[ing] her satchel with two hundred copies of the *Watchtower* [...] instruct[ing] her to go and do the Lord's work" (25). In a predominantly Catholic school, this ostracizes Clara from any sort of community she could have built amongst her peers. While not equal to, this could have served as a substitute for the familial associations she, her mother, and father, lack in England or choose to ignore.

Hortense's religion does a disservice to her daughter, in that it causes her alienation and tampers with her naturally vulnerable adolescent self-esteem. Her religion, and its replacement of culture, hurts Clara in that it leaves her nothing firm on which to rest her identity. Clara cannot *feel* her mother's faith and more importantly, she cannot *see* it. In a Catholic school, planted in a Protestant country, Clara has no reflections to confirm her existence or its value. This is mirrored years later when Irie, built like her estranged grandmother and unlike her slender mother, cannot see herself in her internal and external environment.

Only in Ryan Topps, the most phenotypically opposite version of herself, could she find identification, boosted self-esteem, and eventually, self-agency. And yet, as Hortense's chastisement of Darcus led to his withdrawal from his role as husband and arguably more importantly, father, Hortense also causes Ryan to detach himself from Clara. Undoubtedly, Clara and Ryan's relationship was not built upon a strong foundation. The narrator notes that "Clara was a teenage girl like any other; the object of her passion was only an accessory to the passion itself" (31). However, his conversion to her mother's faith, caused her to lose the man, albeit young, whom her self-assurance rested. Her loss of Ryan coincides with the loss of any leftover traces of faith. During a New Year's Eve party, the same night as the supposed apocalypse for Hortense and Ryan, as "midnight inevitably came and went without the horsemen of the apocalypse making an appearance, Clara surprised herself by falling into a melancholy [...] Clara

quietly mourned the warmer touch she waited for these nineteen years, the all-enveloping bear hug of the Savior [...] the man who was meant to take her away from all this” (37). Clara’s melancholy was brought about by her unfulfilled desire “for a man to whisk her away, to choose her above others so that she might *walk in white with Him: for [she] was worthy*” (38). The pendulum swings backwards as Clara, like her grandmother, searches for self-security in a man. Clara’s dispossession of Ryan, and lack of self-security leads her into the arms of her husband, Archie. This union forever erases any possibility of reconciliation between Hortense and her daughter. In exchange for Clara, Hortense maintains her newfound bond with Ryan. Following Darcus’s highly anticipated death, Ryan moves in with Hortense and together they prepare for the upcoming apocalypse, rescheduled for the year, 2000.

Hortense employed her faith, transferred from her mother, as protection from the turmoil of her external environment. However, her religion produced identical results. Colonialism, in which her mother, herself, and her daughter were subject, sought to destroy the culture of its victims. To do so, it was imperative that they deconstruct the family unit, the most important source of cultural transmission. In his essay, “Conquest of the Mind,” Jason A. McGarvey explains that breaking down the family unit was done by breaking down the members’ trust in one another. He offers the account of an African student, victimized by British imperialism, to explain his understanding of the colonial process:

In order for the colonizers to exploit the Chagga [society] they first needed to establish themselves as the authority. Since authority traditionally rested in the hands of the Chagga elders, the colonizers needed to begin dismantling Chagga cultural traditions. The main tool for doing this was the colonial school [...] The colonizers had to first establish control over the socialization of the people. As a result, the colonial schools

began socializing the children in ways that conflicted with their traditions. The children began to lose faith and respect for the elders as authority figures, and began to see the colonizers as the authority. (1997)

Although Hortense was not the traditional colonial student, for it is unclear whether or not she received any formal education, her commitment to studying and analyzing her religion that was foreign to her native land, allows this account of colonial victimization to apply to her condition. This is particularly true in her relation to her daughter, Clara. For in this pairing, Hortense *is* the elder who loses authority over her child and her child's trust. This results in the dismantling of Hortense's family unit. Yet, most importantly, this breakdown leads to Hortense's dependency on the modern version of the white male colonizer, Ryan Topps. This brings full circle the colonial project ardently resisted by the Bowden matriarch. The baggage passed down from Ambrosia to Hortense similarly manifests itself in Clara's adulthood. As Ambrosia rebelled against Captain Durham, her pseudo-guardian, Clara rebels against Hortense. This defiance proves fruitless, for Clara's life ultimately mirrors her mother's. She has a lackluster marriage, a fragile relationship with her daughter, a questionable parenting style that spawns this fragility, and a litany of her own insecurities that serve as the foundation for all of these issues.

There are multiple parallels between Clara's life and her mother's. Nevertheless, they appear most clearly in her marriage to the novel's protagonist, Archie Jones. Archie is the English equivalent of Darcus Bowden. The difference lies in the fact that the malaise, or undiagnosable illness, that Darcus contracted upon his arrival in England, perhaps a vicious side effect of Anglicization, was present in Archie since birth. And yet, the men differ in their relations with their wives. For Darcus, readers witness no communication between Hortense and himself. Their marriage appears to be one without affection, in which both parties are content.

This lack of affection is also present between Clara and Archie, in which they also find contentment. Readers are provided more insight behind this unlikely union than that of Hortense and Darcus. Clara and Archie met on New Year's Day in the aftermath of a New Year's Eve celebration. There was no overwhelming sense of romantic attraction that brought these two together. In fact, in her decision to marry Archie, Clara knowingly forgoes love. The narrator notes that in doing so, "she had not paid a high price [...] and whatever Corinthians might say, love is not such a hard thing to forfeit, not if you've never really felt it" (40). This glimpse into Clara's thoughts on love reaffirms its imaginable absence in her life before and after her husband's arrival. She does not see herself as a recipient of love. If readers are to judge based on the relations of her parents or her brief involvement with Ryan Topps, we can conclude that she has never seen a true image of love. This places Clara at a disadvantage when it comes to choosing a spouse and [creating/raising] her own family. Because she has never had love nor knows exactly what it is supposed to look like, she is also unable to properly dispense it. This is witnessed in her parenting of Irie and their strained relationship.

However, the effect of their traditionally strained relationship displays itself in Clara's cultural insecurity. One afternoon, when meeting Joyce Chalfen, Irie's eventual quasi-mentor, Joyce asks Clara "which side do you think Irie gets [her intellect] from?" (293). Clara quickly responds by attributing her daughter's smarts to her grandfather, Captain Charlie Durham. After Joyce is gone, Clara chides herself for telling "a downright lie" (294). Although shaky nerves can be factored into Clara's response, it is not the root of the matter. The root is the shame she has in her heritage. This shame prevents Clara from educating Irie in their Jamaican ancestry, which results in Irie's rootlessness.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE EDUCATION(S) THAT MIS-EDUCATE IRIE JONES

Paired with her inherited colonial baggage, this rootlessness leaves Irie vulnerable to the mis-education she receives. Like Ambrosia, multiple people directly and indirectly assign themselves to her education. British society plays an indirect but significant role in influencing Irie's understanding of her environment and, consequently, of herself.

Her grandmother, Hortense, unsuccessfully tries converting her into a Jehovah's Witness. Her secondary school and its instructors fill her head with historical inaccuracies. She studies under the Chalfens, a family of Jewish scientists, who ultimately study her, at least until they find better subjects. Finally, while living with her grandmother, Irie unsuccessfully attempts to educate herself on her family's history. Her lack of cultural knowledge, together with the deliberate lacunae in her understanding of her family's past, make her especially susceptible to this self-guided mis-education.

As we saw earlier, Irie's physical appearance evokes in her a sense of self-loathing, and evokes in others the quick, ill-informed judgments they offer on her character and intelligence. She is *sui generis*; there is no one she encounters in her day-to-day life who looks like her. This awareness of her own singularity prevents her from interacting and identifying with her classmates. Clara tries assuring her daughter that she is "fine" or "okay," like her namesake, but the narrator tells us this reassurance is not enough. Irie "didn't know that she was fine" (222).

Irie is unaware of being "fine," because she is incapable of seeing herself in England, the "gigantic mirror" in which her reflection was missing (222). The insecurity her missing reflection engenders is a common experience of second-generation immigrants. According to Sylvia Hadjetian, the "experience of foreignness can lead to one reflecting on one's own culture,

which can cause insecurity” (30). Again, Irie is denied this doubly-signifying reflection, as she has no awareness of her complex cultural background, and can find no frame of reference in which to situate her body image. Her lack of understanding, her sense of alienation, and her ignorance of her cultural heritage all contribute to her low sense of self-esteem.

Her fragile self-esteem is further strained by her experience at Glenard Oak Comprehensive. In a pivotal scene involving a class reading of a Shakespearean sonnet, we see Irie’s intellectual ostracization. While reading Sonnet 127, Irie offers her opinion on the identity of Shakespeare’s Dark Woman. After mulling over the woman’s dark complexion and “hairs [like] wires, black wires [that] grow on her head,” Irie posits that the dark lady is black (226). Mrs. Roody, Irie’s instructor, quickly dismisses this theory. She lets Irie down gently, by reminding her:

there weren’t any...well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That’s more a modern phenomenon, as I’m sure you know. But this was the 1600s. I mean I can’t be sure, but it does seem terribly unlikely, unless she was a slave of some kind, and he’s unlikely to have written a series of sonnets to a lord and then a slave, is he? (227)

Mrs. Roody’s response is not only disheartening, but it is also incorrect. The “reflection” Irie thought she saw materializing in the form of the Dark Lady, “slunk back into the familiar darkness” (227). But Mrs. Roody is displaying a gap in her own knowledge, for there were Blacks in England, and in the heart of London, during Shakespeare’s time. They may not have constituted a dominant demographic in Elizabethan England, but their small population did not mean non-existence. Mrs. Roody’s ignorance is a figurative example of the literal erasure of these people from British history. There are no definite numbers on how many blacks were present in Elizabethan England, but hundreds were recorded as being employed as “domestic

servants, musicians, dancers, and entertainers” (“Britain’s First Black Community in Elizabethan London”). Mrs. Roody’s conjecture of the “Dark Lady” being a slave, if she were to be black, is also inaccurate. Slavery was defunct in 16<sup>th</sup>-century England. Therefore, whether free or an escaped slave (which was the genesis of much of the England’s black population), blacks in England were free individuals in this era.

Mrs. Roody further problematizes her response when she asserts: “[n]o dear, she just has a dark complexion, you see, as dark as mine, probably” (227). Irie mentally interprets this complexion as “the color of strawberry mousse” (227). Mrs. Roody’s comment places emphasis on the ways history omits minorities. In effect, she tells Irie that someone of her ethnicity would not have been deemed a subject worth Shakespeare’s creative genius. Instead, the worthy subject would be someone who resembled the Scottish instructor. Mrs. Roody’s cultural illiteracy, juxtaposed with Irie’s analysis of one of the iconic pieces of English literature offers Smith’s ironic commentary on the issues within Britain’s educational system. Smith aligns herself with Salman Rushdie’s critique of the multicultural curriculum and its implementation within school systems, since “the mainstream never sees itself as part of the equation as one of the multits” (Hadjetian, Rushdie, 29). The dominant culture might show appreciation for minorities, but this appreciation does not engender a genuine interest the minorities’ cultural histories. Certainly, their histories will not be enough to be presented alongside or replace the history of the dominant group.

It is disquieting that Mrs. Roody declines any possibility of a black person being characterized in Shakespeare’s sonnet, considering one of his most celebrated works chronicles the life and untimely death of a black man. As an English teacher, who was very likely educated in an English institution, her ideas are as surprising as they are unsettling. Considering her

Scottish background, and her country's colonial history with England, her lack of understanding is even more dispiriting. Mrs. Roody's ignorance signifies the inefficacy of the British educational system and the ways in which it has failed both the dominant white culture and its minorities. Yes, Mrs. Roody is only one person. We might find it harsh to generalize her momentary flash of ignorance to indict an entire school system. But she is not the only incompetent educator we see in this text. Couple her with the anonymous headmaster, and this notion of an inadequate school system becomes clearer.

In his physical description and in his performance of his job functions, the headmaster is presented as a caricature of the generalized feeble academic, one who is physically weak, out of step with current realities, easily intimidated, and, ultimately incompetent. He is full of the parlance of multiculturalism, but has not really committed to any level of connection with his charges. The opening line of his introduction casts him as in a "continual state of implosion" (248). His ineptitude displays itself first as an inability to control the students. During a meeting in the headmaster's office, Millat whines for a cigarette, and threatens to leave if he does not get one. Instead of telling him that he cannot smoke, the headmaster capitulates to this petty blackmail. He even "rifles about in his own shirt pocket" for a lighter for Millat (249). Millat lights up, and then blows smoke in his face. The headmaster stifles a cough and accepts this insolence. Such subordination is not limited to just one student. To avoid condemnation from the school board, he was often forced to turn off the fire alarms to mask the hundreds of smokers amongst the student body. Indeed, the "whole school held the headmaster to ransom" (249).

His incompetence is a symptom of the overall ineffectiveness of Glenard Oak Comprehensive. He ends his confrontation with Millat, Irie, and Joshua Chalfen, by proposing that they form a study group. As a "move *away* from behavior chastisement and *toward*

constructive conduct management,” he orders Millat and Irie to meet biweekly for tutoring sessions in the Chalfen home (251). The headmaster confidently notes that this program, which lasts for two months, will be in the “spirit, the whole *ethos* of Glenard Oak, ever since Sir Glenard himself” (252). This favorable view of Sir Glenard and his assumed mission in creating the school further demonstrates his ignorance. His lack of understanding concerning the real Sir Glenard (something revealed to readers later in the text) parallels that displayed by Mrs. Roody. The narrator juxtaposes the headmaster’s ignorance of his school’s roots with its true historical emergence and purpose.

Before the novel depicts Sir Edmund Glenard Flecker’s corrupt historical ties to Irie’s family, he is presented as her school’s “kindly Victorian benefactor [...] whom the school had decided to remember” through its title (252). Certainly, Glenard was the financial backbone of the future school’s fruition. And yet his intentions were rooted in greed, racism, and ignorance. Glenard was a colonial Jamaican planter. He was fascinated with the Jamaican Christians and their devout faith. However, as a plantation owner, he found their work ethic lacking. He felt just the opposite about his fellow Englishmen: he admired their work ethic, but he found their faith to be too sterile and unpronounced, both literally and figuratively. So Glenard sought to marry the best traits of these two races by opening a workhouse in England, where both groups could receive instruction from the other. A day after his epiphany, Glenard “wrote an electrifying letter to *The Times* and donated forty thousand pounds to a missionary group on the condition that it went toward a large property in London” (254). Glenard quickly sent three hundred Jamaicans to England to work in his new factory. But his plan was doomed from the start: the tobacco could not survive the long journey to England without proper equipment for humidification. It also did not help that Glenard’s “mind was a small thing with big holes through which passions regularly

seeped out” (254). Once his new venture was out of sight it vacated his mind. As his business failed, he took up new topics with other British colonial subjects. These interests included surveying such texts as *The Excitability of the Military Hindoo* and *The Effect of Extreme Heat on the Sexual Proclivities of the Trinidadian* (254). His bi-cultural factory met its definitive end in 1907, when he met his demise mid-rape. The headmaster’s ignorance of Glenard’s failed endeavor, and his true nature, foreshadows the eventual failure of his own study program for Joshua, Millat, and Irie.

The Chalfens briefly serve as Irie’s mentors. However, their impact, much like Glenard’s on the Bowden clan, has long-lasting results. Upon their first encounter, Irie is enamored by the family’s dynamic and how they allowed speech to “flow freely from adult to child, child to adult, as if the channel of communication between these two tribes was untrammelled, unblocked by history” (265). History is not employed as a dividing force amongst the Chalfens, as it is in the Jones and Iqbal households, but as a source of unity and fixity. The Chalfens explore and revel in their family’s history. But they also hide the inconvenient parts of it. They don’t speak of their Judaism, and cover up their religious roots with an over-the-top embrace of all things British. But this neglect of their past is not like Hortense’s desire to breed out the white in her family tree. They’re not trying to breed out their Jewish roots. Judaism, for them, is merely inconsequential, something to be picked up or rejected as they decide. Their future involves genetic manipulation, and they are fascinated with the possibility of making all humans as they, the Chalfens, want them to be. FutureMouse is merely the first step in their eugenic project.

Irie finds the Chalfens’ relationship to their own history fascinating, for it stands in sharp contrast to her home, haunted by Clara’s secrets and Archie’s stasis. Clara’s silence on the matter of her family’s history is well-intentioned. She does not want her daughter falling prey to

Hortense's proselytizing. She does not want Irie to suffer the oppressive force of the religion that she had foisted upon her throughout her childhood and adolescence. The irony of this situation is that Clara's attempts to prevent Irie's oppression is in fact the prevailing source of Irie's self-loathing. In an unexpected and historically ill-informed twist, Irie escapes what she sees as the despotism of Archie and Clara's home by running away to stay with her grandmother, the real despot.

Irie's brief stint at her grandmother's home is transformative. She feels she is "hibernating or being cocooned," and is "as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge" (330). While staying with Hortense, Irie discovers for herself a forgotten media cache that has the potential to reveal the secrets of her family's history, and therefore, her own. And thus Hortense's home becomes the most significant site of Irie's mis-education, for it is here that Irie mis-educates herself.

Carter G. Woodson claimed that the mis-education of blacks was based on ignorance of their historical accomplishments. Excluding slave labor, they were taught that they had never contributed anything of value to humanity. This false narrative, fostered by the dominant white culture, made many blacks experience a sense of self-loathing and low self-esteem. Through her attempts to understand her grandmother's books and old photographs, attempts conceived and practiced in isolation, Irie unfortunately creates her own false narrative. She seeks to fill the gaps that Clara has left in her history, and seeks a sense of community with those who look like her. The mirror of England is replaced by the mirror of the Caribbean, but this mirror, as with all mirrors, can only reflect what stands before it. Irie determines the Caribbean "her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings" (331). This limited exposure to her family's history motivates her to re-envision her own identity. As Woodson predicted, this exposure provides her a new sense of self.

However, instead of using this knowledge to dispel the false narratives that plague her, she creates new ones. Her assessment of the past is laden with inaccuracies. The narrator claims Irie “raced voraciously through Hortense’s small and eclectic library” (330). But it is obvious that she does not read these texts thoroughly. If she had, she would have recognized the same discriminatory language and act of colonial “othering” that plagues her in England. The travel narratives, *An Account of a West Indian Sanatorium* and *Dominica*, were not written for a Caribbean audience. Rather, were written to better facilitate the oppression of her ancestors by European colonizers, who used the information they contained to better distort the identities of those they would colonize.

Irie’s impression of her great-grandfather, situated as it is in a historical and cultural vacuum, is also misguided. The more she reads these colonial texts, the more she grows infatuated with Captain Durham. She keeps a picture of him “under her pillow” in hopes that his “richness [...] would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her” (331). Irie fails to recognize the power imbalance between him and her great-grandmother, and the ramifications of such a disparity in age, wealth, influence, power, and, most especially, race. Her lack of a guide to her family’s history does not allow her to see what readers know the first time they encounter the man: he revels in the use of his somewhat limited power to the extent that we may see Hortense herself as the child of rape.

Irie’s reaction towards her ancestral homeland and its inhabitants shows that her desire for a sense of a cultural home is stuck in Hall’s first mode of cultural identity. In the spirit of her great-grandfather, Irie takes a colonial approach to classifying and claiming the Caribbean. The several decades between Irie and the Caribbean of the photographs prevent her from seeing the island in its present state. Therefore, Irie uses her imagination to invent a Caribbean that best

suits her perceived identity. To create this Caribbean, Irie must first dismiss any historical traces of the islanders who could not fit her image. Imbued with postcolonial nostalgia, she freezes the island in time, dismissing even the original inhabitants, the Arawaks, as merely “some *other* Jamaicans” (331). Irie erases these individuals to rationalize and justify her claims to the Caribbean. The narrator likens Irie’s maneuvers to those of “Columbus himself” who believed he “brought [Jamaica] into existence” through his discovery of the island (332). However, this discovery was at the expense of the very existence of the indigenous population.

Ultimately, the colonial encounter between Europeans and the natives of the Caribbean took a significant toll on the indigenous population. Within three decades of Columbus’ first voyage, more than 80 percent of this population had been lost to war and slavery. Many died on their voyage across the Atlantic, while others perished on the island from genocide and disease.

Irie’s tacit approval of the erasure of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean in her historical revisioning does not have consequences as grave or wide-reaching as that of Columbus. Nevertheless, the comparison between Irie and Columbus in their grab for the Caribbean is worth further analysis, particularly in its relation to Irie’s internal conflict with her mixed heritage. Through her kinship to Captain Durham and father, Archie, Irie has inherited European blood and seemingly, the European thirst for conquest. She attempts to invent a new, liberating narrative for herself. However, it is ultimately perverted by the traditional colonial mindset she has acquired through her mis-education.

Millat is Irie’s first conquest in her reenactment of the colonial project. She goes to the Iqbal home, in hopes of encouraging him to have an overdue sit down with Magid. Irie finds Millat in his bedroom, staring in the mirror impersonating Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver*. After poking fun at his antics, Irie beseeches him to meet with and make peace with his brother. She

“made her own personal plea for compromise, peace, and caution” (380). Soon after, “their arms were involved, their legs were involved, their lips were involved, and they were tumbling onto the floor [...] making love on a prayer mat” (381). In yet another blow to her fragile sense of identity, Millat’s post-coital behavior is not affirming. He is horrified by their actions and ardently begins praying, performing the ritual with a level of precision designed to expiate his most recent sin.

Initially, Milat’s reaction brings Irie to tears. This sadness quickly turns into anger. Irie storms to the Chalfens’ house in search of Magid. She must break the person who broke Millat. She views Magid as the reason behind Millat’s inability to love her in the way she has spent her adolescence loving him. In this scene, the narrator remarks “[w]e are so convinced of the goodness of ourselves, and the goodness of our love, we cannot bear to believe that there might be something more worthy of love than us, more worthy of worship” (382). The way in which Irie reacts to Millat’s rejection, seeking sex with Magid in order to “make Magid the second son for once” (382), is arguably a metaphor for the colonial project. The narrator criticizes this type of relationship when describing Captain Durham’s affection for Ambrosia. “[O]h he *loves* her; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly” (299). In Irie’s case, she does not mistreat her lover, but instead mistreats his brother. Irie finds Magid upstairs in the Chalfen’s home and violently has sex with him, “angrily and furiously, without conversation or affection” (382). After they’re finished, Magid makes this colonial perspective overt. He tells her, “it seems to me [...] that you have tried to love a man as if he were an island and you were shipwrecked and you could mark the land with an X. It seems to me it is too late in the day for all that” (382). His assessment of Irie is accurate, but it does not keep her from completing her reenactment of the colonial project..

Irie's final and most significant conquest is herself. At the novel's end, Irie is seen on a Caribbean beach with her daughter, grandmother, and Joshua Chalfen. On the surface, readers may find solace in Irie's resettlement in what she considers to be her homeland. But this move is both problematic and proof of the detrimental effects of her mis-education.

Irie cherishes the photos and books. She is fascinated with the pictures of Ambrosia and Captain Durham and the multiple travel narratives. She spends several hours reading the books and sleeps with the image of her great-grandfather underneath her pillow. And yet the ability to understand the history behind the photos always eludes her. Irie's rose-tinted view of the past is an example of postcolonial nostalgia that plagues many victims of colonialism and its forced migrancy. It tricks its sufferers into believing that the "past is always tense, and the future perfect" (379).

Irie does not understand that there was nothing simple behind "how things were." The knotted, complicated history of both her family and the colonial project--in which her family is still entangled--was as present in her great-grandmother's day as it is now. Ultimately, Irie misuses the tools she has at her disposal, the books and photographs. She pulls together pieces of the past in order to construct her own vision of it. This vision was that of a "homeland," a word that had "a particular spell over Irie" because "it sounded like a beginning" (332). The blank slate her cultural unearthing offered could have proved beneficial for her, had it been properly employed. But in her ignorance she falsely believed that, after discovering this history, she could re-enter it in its pristine, uncomplicated purity. Stuart Hall addresses this problem, as it is endemic to all migrant groups. He cautions those who are blindly eager to "go back to Africa," telling them that, "Africa is not waiting there in the fifteenth or seventeenth century, waiting for you to roll back across the Atlantic and rediscover it in its tribal purity, waiting there in its

prelogical mentality, waiting to be a woken from inside by its returning sons and daughters” (289). Irie’s impression of the Caribbean as “the beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden,” (332) would likely receive the same warning from him.

Carter G. Woodson warned of this potential for facile misinterpretation in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. It was not enough for the black man or woman to learn about their history; they must learn something new. They needed to see more than themselves shackled in chains, working the white man’s land. They needed to see themselves in past positions of power. If they did not achieve a proper perspective on their history, they would continue to view themselves as unworthy of self-determination, for they would never know that they were capable of something greater. Therefore, the mistakes of the past would be continuously repeated. This rings true in Irie’s case. In Irie’s move to the Caribbean, Irie literally mirrors her past. The idealized relationship between her Ambrosia and Captain Durham transcends photographs and manifests itself in Irie’s life. In conclusion, Irie is left on the same island as her great-grandmother with a daughter who will presumably never know her biological father. Consequently, Irie never escapes her mis-education.

For Irie and her female predecessors, their mis-education entails sacrifice. This sacrifice involves either the exploitation, or denial, of their sexuality through their physical bodies or the loss of a stable self-image, which in Irie’s case is predicated on her perception of her body. Ambrosia’s mis-education, through Durham and Glenard’s sexual molestation, exhibits itself literally on her body. Her ultimate rejection of their education and its corrupt curriculum includes her embracing the Jehovah’s Witness faith. The practice of this faith is amplified in the life of Ambrosia’s daughter, Hortense. Unlike her mother, whose choice was taken in the matter, Hortense dismisses her sexuality. Readers witness this notion in her ostensibly sexless and

loveless marriage to Darcus. As her mother, daughter, and granddaughter, Hortense only has one child. Clara is her mother's "miracle baby" who arrived unexpectedly during Hortense's middle age.

And yet, despite the excitement surrounding Clara's conception, the act necessitating it was met with much less enthusiasm. The narrator notes that upon hearing the "Lord's voice while gutting a fish one morning [...] she threw down the marlin, caught the trolley car home, and submitted to her least favorite activity in order to conceive the child He had asked for" (28). Readers are never offered another glimpse into Darcus and Hortense's attempts at conceiving a child. Darcus's physical stagnancy alongside his wife's fervent attention to her religion and its prediction of an upcoming apocalypse gives the novel's audience little room to presume there were previous or subsequent attempts. Hortense's religious zeal does not only lead her to placing her marriage on the backburner, but also strains her relationship to her daughter. In maintaining her faith, she loses Clara. Clara will experience sacrifice and more importantly, compromise, in her marriage as her mother. The intimacy ostensibly missing from Darcus and Hortense's union is also absent from that of Clara and Archie. Upon arriving to her new home with her husband, she notes that "[i]t was *nice*, not as nice as she had hoped but not as bad as she had feared [...] and she had not paid a high price. Only love. Just love. And whatever Corinthians might say, love is not such a hard thing to forfeit, not if you've never really felt it" (40). Here, readers discover the root of Clara's ability to renounce intimacy derives from its absence in her youth. This absence allows her to settle in her marriage and is also accountable for her compromised sense of self that her daughter inherits. This history of sacrifice, spawned by the various mis-educations, characterizes the women of this novel and speaks to England's migrants and their descendants, particularly those whose heritage is rooted in British colonialism.

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